

Connecting the Spiritual *and* the Cultural: Patterns Within Merton's Writings. 1999 Bibliographic Review

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1. Introduction

While Thomas Merton's complete journals have finally been published their enormous quantity challenges readers and such a vast body of material remains a fundamental fact to be recognized in Merton scholarship, not just in relation to the journals but for study of all the writing from poetry to correspondence. Not infrequently, as I have systematically surveyed bibliographical items by and about Merton, it has been his multi-dimensional skills as writer combined with that sheer productiveness which has maintained the commanding presence. This remains the case in 1999.

Editors and writers are grappling with this continuing challenge and as they struggle they are also beginning to examine the intricate mix of cultural and spiritual awareness revealed as a developing story in Merton's works. It is not surprising that while many substantial pieces of inquiry by competent scholars have appeared recently—some utilizing compelling cultural analysis as does Lawrence S. Cunningham—we are simultaneously reminded that the voluminous writings of Merton will demand years of investigation for scholars to interpret. In the immediate future, this enormous opus will most likely continue to be studied piece-by-piece through category, theme, or chronology. This is even more so the case for any 'ordinary' reader of Merton; yet I am not discouraged that consuming Merton's writing is such a gigantic task. Considerable new good scholarship is being done; new presentations of the core message are being made; and new bibliographical tools are being generated. We have much to celebrate.

This monk/writer's dominating presence was especially obvious in 1999 because of the publication of selected journal entries entitled *The*

Intimate Merton prudently culled from the seven-volume edition of the 1939–68 complete journals.¹ Clearly his multiplicity of accomplishments (just within the journal format) will continue to demand considerable attention from scholars as they sort out the strands of Merton's life as revealed in this ambitious 30-year project. This 'condensed' *The Intimate Merton* is a compelling re-presentation of a spiritual quest and stands as a useful and quite readable reflection of Merton's spiritual journey. It is also an inevitable simplification and an inevitable marketing ploy that will attract new readers. Merton is never easily reducible to formula because there is so much to be digested, yet it has been unavoidable that we get specialized and focused interpretations of his message and accomplishment. Such inevitability regarding selections from the journals is probably even helpful because we can better digest carefully arranged pieces.

As icon of spirituality, as world-denying hermit, as avant-garde poet, as devoted teacher, as enthusiastic prayerful monk, as outspoken critic of culture: innumerable ways of approaching Thomas Merton exist. What we are beginning to see, because editors and scholars remind us with increasing frequency, is he could be all those things while he also was 'one of us', seeking God's presence in silence. This simple fact comes across convincingly in *The Intimate Merton* and this is what is stressed. Merton's challenge as a writer was in expressing the inexpressible: how to put spiritual awareness into words became a major part of his life's work. What he learned is that his life and writings would never be a matter of stasis, but rather a slow ripening because of constant attention to many levels of spiritual and cultural awareness.

Scholars are beginning to explore these interrelated issues. As suggested earlier, when analyzing Merton scholarship, I have often noted the difficulty of absorbing the sheer bulk of his writing: When I surveyed the completion of the selected correspondence in *The Merton Annual*, in 1996 I argued that the enormous number of letters, published in five selected volumes, provides such diversity that it is sometimes impossible to keep track of Merton's interests.² Similarly, in commentary about the journals in *The Merton Annual*, in 1999 I stressed that because of the amount of journal, it too can seem over-

1. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (eds.), *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1999), pp. 374 with index ISBN 0-06-251620-5 (hardback). \$28.00.

2. V.A. Kramer, 'Thousands of Words: A Bibliographical Review', *The Merton Annual* 8 (1996), pp. 221-45.

whelming. While carefully planned by Merton—not as a diary, but as contributions to his self-portrait—it is necessary to assimilate a lot of material to perceive the larger patterns of spiritual quest.³ Merton and the editors of *The Intimate Merton* certainly realized his ongoing spiritual journey was not made in isolation from either monastic life or from the wider American culture. His was a continuing journey that allowed him to build connections. Without taking issue with the accomplishments of this new selection of journal entries, or with important studies that appeared about Merton in 1999, one can issue the caveat that many of the spiritual and cultural connections assumed by him still remain to be articulated by scholars and the general reader. It is easy to label Merton and keep him in the box of our earlier expectations and harder to acknowledge his gradual change.

George A. Kilcourse's review-essay about 1998 publications concerning Merton occasioned the prudent suggestion, by way of Philip Sheldrake, that scholars should examine work like Merton's within the context of the historical settings of particular spiritualities.⁴ This observation applies to much of what is surveyed this year, yet I must qualify it remains exceedingly difficult to pin down what a particular spirituality is as transmuted over time. Of course, this is precisely the problem with the multi-dimensional Merton.

Two books in a series edited by Sheldrake, *Traditions of Christian Spirituality*, one by Esther De Waal on the Cistercian Tradition and another by Richard Woods, OP about the Dominican Tradition, illustrate the difficulty of making specific connections with historical spiritual traditions. De Waal's study is informal and often focuses on particular aspects of community life (place, prayer, etc.). Interestingly, she frequently refers to Thomas Merton, yet finally her study seems to me of minimal value as an estimate of the Cistercian tradition of spirituality as it exists in the present moment. Woods's book is quite the opposite in style—formal, academic, often dealing with concepts of early Dominican thinkers—but without any systematic attempt to analyze the last two centuries.⁵ These two books are idiosyncratic and only in an indirect way provide a sense of what these two particular

3. V.A. Kramer, '“Non-Public” Writing in Journal and Correspondence: A Core Radiating Outward. 1997 Bibliographic Review', *The Merton Annual* 11 (1998), pp. 174-95.

4. G.A. Kilcourse, 'Alternative Frameworks for Spirituality: The Frontier of Merton Studies' *The Merton Annual* 12 (1999), pp. 207-32.

5. See Ester De Waal, *The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998) and Richard Woods, OP, *Mysticism and Prophecy: The Dominican Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

living spiritual traditions are today. I suspect the authors, both of whom I know and respect, would argue that their sketches of centuries of tradition must remain merely first steps. This is not to denigrate their studies, but to suggest that when approaching a writer like Merton it remains quite difficult to keep him categorized because his spirituality drew on so many sources both within monastic culture and beyond. When reading the complete journals, this is especially obvious. It is less so with an abbreviated version.

In Merton studies in 1999 scholars began to focus *both* on the intricacies of particular texts as well as upon the relationship of texts to the life *and* to the wider culture. We are therefore beginning to have better tools to perceive a more nuanced picture of Merton. Somewhat ironically, we have also been given this new book of selected journal entries, *The Intimate Merton*, which does a successful job of demonstrating the complexity of his life journey within the framework of the Cistercian life, yet because of focus and space limitations this selection cannot give us a fuller picture of Merton's developing fascination with the wider culture and his far-ranging ideas about interactions with that culture: literature, aesthetics, politics, race, peace, social issues.

2. Books by Merton

The Intimate Merton may seem a bit odd to anyone who knows the complete corpus, yet it is a useful piece of work, a thorough success. Two editors were given an impossible job, but following, I am sure, the publisher's directions, 'Cut, cut, cut...', they assembled a useful, intriguing book. This the inspiring story of Merton's persistence and of acceptance of God. It is carefully edited according to its plan and it flows. Merton's repetitions are silently eliminated. Much is omitted. Even the complaining Merton is gone.

The exceedingly strange title of this grouping of selections says a lot about the commercial pressures that must have been exerted on the editors. It is a most unfortunate choice for a title, while in a startling way useful. We are given something close to the 'intimate' in the French sense (think of Raissa Maritain's *Journal*, which Merton loved) where emphasis upon interior meditation is central. One of the editors for this project once suggested that a good title for such a collection would have been Merton's own words 'Mercy, within mercy, within mercy'. These poetic words summarizing Merton's celebration of God's love from the 'Fire Watch' section of *The Sign of Jonas* capture this new book's trajectory.

With the complete journals published it was inevitable that such a story be attempted. These editors chose wisely. What is accomplished is more than just useful. It is neither a summary of the life nor of the journals. *The Intimate Merton* gives a necessary overview and as part of the mosaic provides a sense of the continuing accomplishments of Merton as monk, journal writer, and seeker.

This handsomely printed volume uses a larger, more readable typeface than the complete set of seven volumes, includes a carefully chosen set of photographs, and is a pleasure to read because it is compelling and concise. But to reduce seven large volumes to snippets in one smaller book must have been a daunting chore. Other editors would surely have produced a considerably different text because there is simply no perfect way to do such a thing. This book is a project totally different from the seven fat books from which it is derived. The complete journals are the crafted documentation of a process as Merton was finding his way. The beauty of this kind of exercise is that the old patterns in the original journals are still there and surely one of the benefits of this new book will be that it should encourage readers to go back to the volumes from which it derives.

Each volume of three hundred plus pages has been culled to build a section of approximately fifty pages here. *The Intimate Merton* functions like a jeweler's work where a new view of precious stones is provided within a new setting. This is a dressy Merton, a core shown off to advantage. We see that core more clearly.

The rationale for making these selections is a reasonable one and Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo are to be complimented for their careful work of honing down approximately 3,500 pages of entries to give us a set of focused selections about vocation and God's mercy. The editors did not set out to sanitize Merton, yet in many cases months of entries (perhaps as many as 30 to 40 pages in the complete journals) are represented here by only a few paragraphs. That is not necessarily bad, but it must have imposed a feeling of great responsibility upon the editors. How best to focus on the essence? How to select and give readers enough information about the most important aspects of Merton's continuing quest? How not to distort?

The editors provide commentary about how they chose what to include. Their introduction 'A Path through Thomas Merton's Journals' provides a clear rationale for their methodology.⁶ They point out Merton wanted to write journal entries which would ultimately make

6. *The Intimate Merton*, pp. xi-xii.

a 'book of everything',⁷ yet that he never meant he would include 'everything'. Rather his job became to serve as a poet's way of giving birth to the 'inner responses of his spirit'. In a very real sense, then, as the editors insist, 'Merton became a monk by writing about becoming a monk'.⁸ That pattern is at the center of *The Intimate Merton*.

The editors stress that to do serious study of Merton one must go back to the seven volumes of complete extant journals. Their set of selections, they warn, is at best 'a work of translation...a revisioning'.⁹ *The Intimate Merton* is not how Merton presented himself in the complete journals. This is a new way of looking at the life work—streamlined, simplified, with much of the torturous questioning disappointments and going down dark alleys omitted.

Major themes were selected and through that thematic arrangement we obtain valuable reflections of Merton's story including: (1) his hope to be more than a writer; (2) the search for a monastic identity through writing; (3) an appropriation of Holy Wisdom as a metaphor for God; (4) the failed 'search' for the perfect place; and finally (5) Merton's strong developing sensitivities to the simple and the natural. Such are the primary themes repeated. Other unfolding patterns—about rooms, of dreams, about education function here like overlapping filters as various characteristics of Merton are presented. The editors' job, successfully executed, was to 'deeply [edit] Merton's text to present him as favorably and faithfully as we could'.¹⁰ This was literally to clear a path through the vast thirty-year project. The result suggests how later others might make side paths to explore still other basic patterns. Solitude or community life would be other examples of related basic themes.

This new text will have a significant effect on how Merton is perceived. Newcomers to Merton may even choose to read this book first rather than the warhorse, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, about which Merton himself had severe reservations. Use of *The Intimate Merton* may, in fact, become the easiest method for absorption of the general patterns of Merton's spiritual life. Like the seven complete volumes, crafted by him to suggest his continuing struggle, these suitably chosen selections provide the story of the evolution of Merton from self-confident writer to questioner to acceptor of God's plan.

I have lingered with this edited text since I suspect that it will be the

7. *The Intimate Merton*, p.xi.

8. *The Intimate Merton*, p. xiii.

9. *The Intimate Merton*, p. xvi.

10. *The Intimate Merton*, p. xvi.

subject of some complaints because it could be much fuller, or different in emphasis. What must be emphasized about *The Intimate Merton* is it is an honest representation of a fascinating story. Perhaps it is in his questioning that we have Merton's greatest contributions: the sense that for him the difficult and ambiguous, the unanswerable, is more important than the easily formulated. Also Merton's seeking was not different than others. His gift of documentation allowed him to demonstrate that his relationship to God was often found in the ordinary. *The Intimate Merton* shows us all this, yet much had to be omitted and that obvious point demands some attention.

In my view, as we read the complete journals it becomes clear that Merton sought to build connections between his everyday and ordinary insights and his developing appreciation of the grace and mercy of God. He sensed that such insight would be valuable for readers who in later years would work their way through these complete journals. *The Intimate Merton* is definitely designed for another kind of reader. It clears a path by projecting a new portrait. What remains for some of its readers will be to go back to the complete journals (and letters and all that other writing) and observe how long and hard the process was for such insights to become articulated.

The entries so carefully chosen by Hart and Montaldo do provide an excellent overview of Merton's spiritual quest. What, of course, is missed in such truncation is a sense of the many people Merton met and with whom he developed friendships; his ongoing correspondence; reading; and his sustained questioning of himself about how he must balance the contemplative life with his gift as writer.

As earlier suggested, this book should lead readers back to a fuller story. Here we have, for example, only 41 pages of selections from the first volume, *Run to the Mountain*, less than a tenth of the 1939-1941 period. This is serious shaping by editors from their 'raw' material and it is quite clear other aspects of Merton's story could well have been emphasized.

At two ends of this newly created spectrum, included in *The Intimate Merton* are all the remembrances of Merton's dreams and most of his conscious meditations about the job of writing. These useful choices are recollections of what was more or less unconscious as well as Merton's systematic reflections about his role as writer. Both sets of materials will provide research topics for future scholars. What is lacking is a sense of the 30 year struggle (so often expressed in other journal entries) to understand the types of insights here extracted. The process is lost sight of; the essence of what is achieved showcased.

A potential difficulty, which the editors surely anticipated, is that

should a reader become too reliant upon these selections, it will be easy to forget that vast amounts of materials were omitted. If we go to *Learning to Love*¹¹ and observe 'A Midsummer's Diary for M' we find page after page of anguished Merton omitted. If we look at the opening of *Turning Toward the World*,¹² the complexity of that context cannot be suggested by the few entries chosen. Absent is the sense that in those mid-1960s months many events were occurring in Merton's life which would allow a considerably different mode of existence to develop, finally allowing Merton to live as a quasi-hermit and also to write more about connections with the world. Within the space allowed here, there can be little sense of his anticipation of this new developing tone in his life.

Finally, all these are minor reservations about a book that will introduce Merton to an immense audience, and which I suspect will prove of great influence in reshaping Merton's reputation in the next century. The book is contracted for translation into many world languages and that is a harbinger of its importance. I justify this lengthy commentary, therefore, on the inevitability of influence of this inevitable text. Writing as an editor of one of the complete volumes of journals, I have to indicate any editor would be envious of the job assigned and successfully accomplished here by Hart and Montaldo. Other editors will inevitably gather other stories from the complete journals.

A significant book of re-edited Merton essays published in 1998, should be noted for the record: In 1998 a new edition of *Contemplation in a World of Action* appeared and it was analyzed in *The Merton Annual*.¹³ That edition omitted four essays by Merton about the eremitical life, but they do appear in the 1998 *Solitude and Love of the World*, published by Burns & Oates. A concise 1999 review by Dorothy LeBeau about both of these re-edited texts can be consulted.¹⁴

Two other brief items of note: HarperSanFrancisco paperback editions now exist for all seven of the Complete Journals, and in each instance some minor corrections of error have been introduced. Other paperback editions of Merton continue to appear with regularity attesting to his continuing large readership. Farrar, Straus Giroux re-published four of their editions in 1999: *The New Man* (20th printing);

11. Christine Bochen (ed.), *Journals*, VI, 1966-67 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

12. Victor A. Kramer (ed.), *Journals*, IV, 1960-63 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

13. See *The Merton Annual* 12 (1999), p. 212.

14. 'A "World" Divided in Two', *The Merton Seasonal* 24.4 (1999), pp. 26-28.

The Silent Life (19th printing); *Thoughts in Solitude* (27th printing); and *Mystics and Zen Masters* (14th printing).

3. Books Concerning Merton

Three new books provide significant demonstrations of new ways to investigate Merton. The book by Lawrence S. Cunningham, and chapters in trail-blazing studies by Mark S. Massa and David Leigh, each provide significant, but limited, approaches to Merton. Each of these investigations demonstrates that scholars are successfully moving beyond some of the predictability of the past (which lingers on, by the way, as I will suggest briefly in subsequent comments about three less exciting books).

Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision, a volume in the Eerdmans Publishing Co. Library of Religious Biography, is an insightful study, well grounded in the work which Lawrence S. Cunningham has done over the years as commentator and editor of Merton. Cunningham has, of course, also proven to be a knowledgeable reader and reviewer of scholarly books about Christianity in general. His anthology, *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master* (Mawah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992) stands as an excellent compilation of Merton's primary contributions as spiritual teacher. His role as editor for Volume III of the journals, *A Search for Solitude*, further familiarized him with the crucial years (1953–60) when Merton was slowly coming to an awareness of his developing strength as a spiritual master.

Cunningham's book provides a valuable analysis of Merton as thinker-critic who gradually became more aware of his responsibility to make connections with others because of his monastic vision. Without that monastic foundation none of Merton's work would be shaped as it is. Further, as he matured, Cunningham argues, he was constantly investigating other religious beliefs and as he became stronger in his own commitments, he was better able to articulate reasons for building connections with other faiths. This energetically written study is rooted in Cunninghams's clear appreciation of monasticism and the vibrancy of the modern and contemporary church. He correctly emphasizes that Merton was one who realized that both the monastic life and life in the pilgrim church had to be constantly in a process of change, yet as a movement forward one sometimes full of pain.

A considerable strength of Cunningham's work is that he is able gracefully to place Merton's life and thought within the context of an evolving church, an institution which in 1938 and 1941 when Merton

was new to it frequently harkened back to centuries earlier, yet became an institution which by the time Vatican II had been experienced breathed a new vision, one which Cunningham convincingly demonstrates Merton shared. The lasting contribution of Cunningham's study is he builds many appropriate and necessary connections between Merton's monastic career and the myriads of influences that contribute to the development of the literary work.

The book explodes with intelligent suggestions about possible influences upon Merton and by him upon the wider culture because of his writing. We see the career unfolding: Augustinian patterns early (Prologue); the highly clericalized life at Gethsemani (Chapter 1); Merton's intensive reading of the fathers of the Church (Chapter 2); and his developing interest in other religious orders and places (Chapter 3). Cunningham's facility for pulling all the important threads together is persuasive:

...the various clusters of interest...Merton constructed in the late 1950s correspond to...fundamental themes...in deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, especially in...areas of peace and war, ecumenical and interreligious relations, and the presence of grace outside the Christian community... Merton never figured prominently in the work of the Council [but] like other prominent Catholic thinkers Romano Guardini and Hans Urs von Balthasar...made...silent contributions...what concerned the Council had been central to Merton's concerns.¹⁵

Cunningham stresses 'the monastic vision' as the chief ingredient in Merton's growth and development. Organized into eight parts with a prologue handling the premonastic years, this text ultimately concentrates on the final decade of Merton's life. It is a successful contribution because the author provides so many valuable insights about the era in which Merton lived, while demonstrating he knows the Merton canon.

Cunningham does quite well in demonstrating how particular texts reveal the monastic vision and how with success Merton put that monastic vision to work in building connections beyond the monastery. Sometimes Merton's view of contemporary culture had to be less than optimistic. Cunningham's analysis of *Seeds of Destruction* (pp. 106-10) is right on the mark. His analysis of major documents produced by Merton, along with a clear control of the primary material, allows Cunningham to assert that Merton's monastic commitments remained firm.

15. *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. xii and 228, with index. ISBN 0-8028-0222-2 (paperback). \$16.00.

There are some minor problems because of the format. Cunningham has only so much space and he sometimes seems to be moving too rapidly from document to document. Sometimes there is repetition in the text which a copy editor should have caught. Some of these limitations are compensated for in the chapter 'Some Bibliographical Notes' (pp. 211-25) where the author pulls together an enormous amount of information as guide to further investigation.

Two other books, *Catholics and American Culture*, by Mark S. Massa and *Circuitous Journeys*, by David J. Leigh (forthcoming) deserve briefer commentary. Both will prove to be valuable for readers of Merton even though they contain only single chapters about him.¹⁶ In each instance a specialized mode of investigation successfully analyzes Merton as an example of a cultural phenomenon.

Mark S. Massa investigates various figures and movements within American Catholic culture during the middle part of the twentieth century, pivotal moments as Catholicism changed from being less an inwardly focused immigrant church and became more attuned to mainstream American culture. All his chapters are of interest and each stands as an independent study. The opening chapters are about Leonard Feeney, Merton, Joe McCarthy and Fulton Sheen. The one on Merton is representative of Massa's imaginative American Studies approach which allows a confluence of elements to be studied. He sees Merton as a phenomenon comparable to Fulton Sheen, someone important as much because emblematic of cultural forces inside and outside the church as because of individual power.

This incisive investigation employs Erik Ericson to focus on the early public Merton, and Merton's presentation of his own conversion in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This is a story, Massa argues, which like Martin Luther's allowed Merton 'in solving his own person problems' (according to Ericson's theory) to develop 'a "solution" of sorts for one of the major problems of his age'.¹⁷ Massa argues skillfully that this 'Great Man' theory explains 'Merton's dramatic appearance on the Catholic religious landscape...his publishing success [etc]'. This utilization of Erickson's theory successfully illustrates Merton's role in the new post-immigrant American Catholicism. Massa demonstrates that Merton, as a cultural prophet, sensed that the life of the spirit was

16. Mark S. Massa, *Catholics and American Culture, Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 278 pp., with index. ISBN 0-8245-1537-4 (hardback). \$24.94; and David J. Leigh, *Circuitous Journeys, Modern Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 259 pp., with index. ISBN 0-8232-1993-3.

17. *Catholics and American Culture*, p. 43.

to be cultivated by persons beyond the monastery, which is to say that American Catholics were ready for Merton. His story, as presented in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas*, was the story which Americans needed to hear in the 1940s and 1950s, precisely when Merton's general popularity peaked.

Massa's work pinpoints one significant moment in Merton's career. Because it is limited to the last part of the 1940s, it cannot do much to account for the subsequent patterns of dissent and questioning which were so important later in Merton's career. Because this treatment of Merton is carefully focused there is no way to quibble with its findings. However, one longs for this American studies approach to be applied to the entire career in a way similar to Cunningham's investigations already analyzed which stresses the monastic. Massa's study reveals a gift for finding paradigmatic moments or events in Catholic history which have changed Catholicism and its relationship to American culture. The Merton chapter has to be read in conjunction with other sections of the book which give insight into about how being Catholic in America in this period of rapid assimilation into a secularized American culture required a certain amount of straddling two parts of the mind and spirit, simultaneously aware of past and present. His penultimate excellent chapter about the University of Notre Dame and its transformation from backwater to intellectual powerhouse is worth the price of the book. It, like the chapter on Merton, demonstrates how Americans changed because they found ways to adapt, not to abandon or ignore, the core of their Catholic identity.

A book which well might be read in tandem with Massa's is David Leigh's ambitious study of spiritual autobiography.¹⁸ (Scheduled for 1999, it will appear in 2000.) Leigh studies ten spiritual autobiographies of the last century and provides a close reading of *The Seven Storey Mountain* within the context of the specialness of spiritual autobiography. Texts by Merton, Dorothy Day, Gandhi, C.S. Lewis, Malcolm X, Black Elk, Paul Cowan, Rigoberta Mechhu, Dan Wakefield and Nelson Mandela are examined for distinguishing characteristics. Traits that set these twentieth-century books apart from earlier ones include religious alienation because of separation from the visible church; autonomy, which derives from the breakdown of a traditional hierarchical society; appropriation, which comes from the modern lack of a common human nature; and inauthenticity:

18. See n. 17.

...the modern autobiographer is an alienated seeker struggling with unmediated existence, an autonomous searcher struggling with an unauthorized identity, a self-appropriating thinker struggling with the lack of a stable sense of the self, and an authentic proponent of social change struggling with a paralyzing environment...¹⁹

Merton's classic *The Seven Storey Mountain* is ably analyzed as exemplifying a circular narrative movement. Childhood events raise questions which cause the author to pursue a negative journey; then in a second stage the author discovers a transforming world; and finally in the final phase, some of the original questions can be resolved. In this spiral movement, one becomes one's own parent. In fact, this is a pattern throughout Merton's entire life and writings, and therefore Leigh's insights should prove of value to other investigators of Merton.

Such autobiography is narrative which 'embodies the life story of the author as self-conscious subject present to itself but also reflectively exploring and affirming the interrelationship of his...interior, interpersonal, and social world'.²⁰ Leigh's insightful reading of *The Seven Storey Mountain* demonstrates its fundamental importance, not just as revelation about Merton, but rather as a paradigm for the contemporary seeker. Again, one would like to see this methodology applied to a wider spectrum of Merton's writing, for it is true, as Leigh argues, that Merton finds himself resolving conflicts, but then on the journey forward continuing to find himself paradoxically 'in the belly of a paradox'.²¹ This excellent reading of the early Merton demonstrates both the continuing significance of Merton's classic writing and the significance of Merton being able to synthesize fundamental patterns about his culture by raising questions about himself. Leigh's study should lead to more Merton investigation.

Three more books can be evaluated briefly: One is a translation from a 1996 French compilation, Gozier's *Fifteen Days of Prayer with Thomas Merton*,²² another is notes from a retreat, Dear's *The Sound of Listening: A Retreat from Thomas Merton's Hermitage*,²³ and lastly, one is a meditation: Wilkes's *Beyond the Walls: Monastic Wisdom for Everyday*

19. *Circuitous Journeys*, pp. xi-xiv.

20. *Circuitous Journeys*, p. 26

21. *Circuitous Journeys*, p. 55.

22. André Gozier, OSB (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 1999), pp. 97. ISBN 0-7648-0401 (paperback). \$7.95.

23. John Dear, SJ (New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 126. ISBN 0-8264-1189-4 (paperback). \$13.95.

Life.²⁴ The first, Grozier, is a useful structured introduction to Merton through prayer based on his thought; the second, Dear, is a book of wordy reflections which grew out of a week's stay at Merton's Gethsemani hermitage; and the last is a sometimes tedious, but readable, twelve-month experiment reported about monthly visits to Mepkin Abbey.

The first two books are like so many other collections and brief thematic studies of Merton. They are of minimal value, but serve like gift boxes of candy to remind us of Merton's continuing presence. The third, *Beyond the Walls* by Paul Wilkes, has genuine value as a demonstration of Merton's influence upon Wilkes and, more importantly, as an image of contemporary monasticism. Wilkes asks if monastic wisdom such as is reflected in Merton's writing has applicability to today's culture. He demonstrates that it does. The book is best when it is not confessional-Wilkes, but instead when it praises the monastic life observed at Mepkin Abbey, a daughterhouse of Gethsemani.

4. Scholarly Tools about Merton

Three focused and successful studies—all of which will be of great help to scholars—merit attention, but since all three are tools to be used, I am not going to attempt to analyze them in great detail. Rather I suggest that they are the kinds of detailed spadework which has been needed. These three studies will assist scholars to dig deeper into Merton. These include a new dissertation about Merton theses and dissertations; a handbook built upon the idea of a timeline for all Merton's publications; and a collection of materials about Merton and Sufism.

The first of these bibliographic works is Paul Pearson's dissertation 'Research on Research: A Bibliography of Theses and Dissertations about Thomas Merton' (September 1998).²⁵ Pearson has checked many bibliographies beyond the standard ones such as *PMLA*, and he has located 68 theses or dissertations which are not at The Thomas Merton Studies Center in Louisville. This large find will be a valuable resource to scholars. It is also to be mounted on the World Wide Web.

The second bibliographical tool, compiled by Patricia A. Burton, is *A Merton Vade Mecum, a Quick-Reference Bibliographic Handbook, Comprising: A Thomas Merton Timeline with: Journal Entries, Letters, Publi-*

24. Paul Wilkes (New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 245. ISBN 0-385-49435-1 (hardback). \$21.00.

25. Doctoral dissertation, University of London.

cations, *Life and Historical Events, and: Publications List, Notes, [and] Appendices*.²⁶ This valuable piece of work makes it possible for scholars to observe the order in which the energetic Merton produced all his writings. It is a comprehensive tool which will make it far easier for scholars to relate various pieces to the complete body of writing. Innumerable uses can be imagined. This is a careful piece of systematic scholarship which will make it easier to see how Merton worked, how one project, or letter, led to another, etc.

The third important new tool is *Merton and Sufism, The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*.²⁷ This beautifully produced book collects materials both by and about Merton in relation to his interests concerning Sufism. The assembled material demonstrates Merton's fascination with Sufism and gives a hint of his concern about being misinterpreted because of these interests. Articles reprinted, some revised, some new scholarly interpretations, along with Merton's related writing are collected. A detailed comprehensive review of this volume by Terry Graham appeared in *The Merton Seasonal* and that thorough review could well be consulted because it places this 'compendium' in a context not easily summarized here.²⁸

The book includes a 'Preface' by Seyyed Hossein Nasr; a 'Dramatis Personae' with biographical sketches of the seven main participants in Merton's dialogue about Sufism; and an introduction by William C. Chittick. These introductory pieces establish the setting for the intriguing story of Merton's often enthusiastic attraction to Islam and his engagement with aspects of Sufism and prayer. Eleven pieces follow, some reprinted and others new. The first six investigate specific aspects of Merton's interest in Islam and study of Sufism. These include articles by Burton B. Thurston and Bonnie Thurston about Merton's specific knowledge of Islam, two by Sidney H. Griffith about Louis Massignon, an essay on Islamic themes in Merton's poetry by Erlinda Paguio, and a translation of text to which Merton had access, 'A Treatise on the Heart'.²⁹

Other parts of the volume include 'Merton's Sufi Lecture Notes to Cistercian Novices, 1966-68', an article about Merton's reading of the

26. Published by The Thomas Merton Foundation, Louisville, KY. \$20.00.

27. Edited by Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999), pp. 342, no index. ISBN 1-887752-07-2 (paperback). \$28.00.

28. 'Telling the Untold Story', *The Merton Seasonal* 24.4 (1999), pp. 20-25.

29. This text by Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Hakim, a translation which originally appeared in *The Muslim World* (1961), is an abridgement; it contains the translator's introduction and part of section I of six parts which the publisher, Fons Vitae, plans to publish complete.

Martin Lings book, *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*, by Gray Henry, a piece by Nicole Abadie on a significant two-day visit of Merton with a Sufi holyman, 'The Visit of Sidu Abdeslam to Gethsemani', and an extensive article by Rob Baker, 'Merton, Marco Pallis and the Traditionalists', perhaps the most comprehensive piece in the book. Merton's essay 'Final Integration: Toward Monastic Therapy' and a photo essay (with no captions) are also included along with a set of appendices: (A) Merton's Sufi poems; (B) his Sufi book reviews; and finally, (C) Frithjof Schuon's 'The Universality of Monasticism and its Relevance to the Modern World'. All these unsifted materials provide an invaluable resource for investigation of Merton's attraction to Sufism.

The introductory pieces by Nsar and Chittick set the scene and the initial set of essays by the Thurstons, Griffith and Paguio rather straight-forwardly provide access to specifics about Islamic themes and connections. The other pieces focused on Merton's study of texts, correspondence, and his meeting of individuals are more difficult to characterize. It might be noted that the prescient Merton clearly realized he had to be cautious in his relationships with some of his correspondents. Especially in the lengthy discussion by Rob Henry about Merton's correspondence with Marco Pallis (pp. 220-23), and thereby with the traditional circle around Fritjof Schuon, Merton's concerns about how he might best continue to explore Sufism are delineated. Much of this fascinating material is like an elaborate unfinished detective story. Its value is in its implications for further inquiry.

5. A Video About Merton

The video produced from the 10 December 1998 program held at Bellarmine College, *Women Who Knew Merton*, a panel discussion produced by The Thomas Merton Foundation, is a valuable resource for several reasons.³⁰ Moderated by Christine Bochen, this edited tape provides excellent insight into Merton's relationship to women; to the role of women in the church; and about spirituality in general. Comments are made by Sister Margaret Brennan, IHM, Sister Myriam Dardenne, OCSO, Madelyn Meatyard, Tommie O'Callaghan, and Sister Mary Luke Tobin, all of whom knew Merton in the mid-1960s. Their comments and dialogue allow us to appreciate the enthusiasm

30. Available from The Thomas Merton Foundation, 2001 Newburg Rd, Louisville, KY 40205, \$20.00.

of Merton's life and interests. One thing is basic: he was never pretentious while he remained exceedingly focused and joyous.

6. General Awareness about Merton and Periodical Literature

Brief comment remains to be made about periodical articles of value and references to Merton both in the popular press and in scholarly journals. The fact is that little about him appears in esteemed journals of national or international reputation except by a few already recognized scholars.

This leads one to questions about Merton's readership and influence. While his readership is significant in numbers, does he seem to be of much interest to scholars who are beyond the predictable circle of those attracted to *The Merton Annual*?

Related to such a query, it should be noted that many brief references to Merton continue to appear in a somewhat limited range of books and periodicals from *America* to *The Catholic Worker*, yet little of this appreciative commentary has more than passing value. It is hardly on the cutting edge.³¹

Could it be that Merton is in danger of becoming a classic writer by name, but someone who in fact is seldom read in wider circles? Similarly, only occasional studies about his work seem to appear in foreign language journals. (Nevertheless, one of Merton's commentators had 1999 work published in a Spanish book and a Japanese journal. This does seem to indicate some worldwide interest).³²

We have to acknowledge that we are far from Merton becoming a significant internationally recognized figure who is generating substantial scholarly work. The truth is he remains a fairly parochial figure, and while the periodical work to which I now refer has value, it is often a matter of either an isolated scholar announcing a discovery of Merton's importance, or someone already firmly established within the Merton circle assisting us to refine our knowledge.

What is clearly called for are more investigations which link Merton's work with a wider body of scholarship. Of interest, precisely because in conversation with postmodern theory is a 1998 article by

31. See for example, Brian Terrell, 'Monastic Roots of the Catholic Worker Movement', *The Catholic Worker* 64.7 (1999), p. 8.

32. Maria Luisa Lopez, *Ni Angel Ni Estatua: El Sacerdocio en Los Escritos de Thomas Merton* [Neither Angel Nor Statue: The Priesthood in the Writings of Thomas Merton] (Madrid: Ediciones 'San Pio X', 1999), pp. 101, paperback; and 'The Thirtieth Anniversary of Thomas Merton's Death', 14.1 *Research Institute of Christian Culture* [Sapientia University, Japan] (1999), pp. 99-117.

Robert Webster entitled 'Thomas Merton and the Textuality of the Self: An Experiment in Postmodern Spirituality'.³³ Webster examines ways that Merton can serve as a guide through the difficult terrain of skepticism about language as understood by deconstruction. He argues that for Merton 'the text becomes the central avenue that makes the self accessible', yet Merton also realized the limitations of language'.³⁴ Thus, for him the 'presence of texts was not a burden [,] rather an affirmation to enter the life of silence'. This fruitful investigation successfully demonstrates that in a 'post-modern agenda, as informed by Merton, the self must be seen for what it is: *embodied nothingness*'.³⁵

Webster notes that Merton's acceptance of solitude, poverty, and the contemplative life provided him with a space of liberty which allowed affirmation of 'God as writer' and that therefore self-consciousness, never to be put fully into language, is 're-formed within the context of the Spirit'.³⁶ This is a successful probe yet limited to a small body of Merton's writing.

An article by George A. Kilcourse, Jr in *Cross Currents* pursues a related idea, 'Thomas Merton's Contemplative Struggle: Bridging the Abyss to Find Freedom'.³⁷ Kilcourse's assessment of Merton's continuing appeal emphasizes the personal quality of Merton's accomplishment and argues that Merton had a genius 'for embracing the truth no matter where he found it'.³⁸ Using many references to images of the abyss which recur throughout the writing and by synthesizing, Kilcourse demonstrates that throughout the corpus Merton is a spiritual writer unafraid to share his own experiences and 'multiple layers of personal struggle'.³⁹ He did this as he also shared the task of communicating with readers about how he integrated his life 'around the transcendent mystery of the Christ and salvation'. Thus, Merton's willingness to embrace the abyss which he experienced in his own life and to deal directly with the fact that life demands that one be alone is fundamental. For Merton 'Karl Rahner's diaspora model for the survival of Christianity in a secular, non-believing world' demonstrates key patterns in the life and the writing.⁴⁰

33. *The Journal of Religion* 78.3 (July 1998), pp. 387-404.

34. Webster, 'Textuality of the Self', p. 393.

35. Webster, 'Textuality of the Self', p. 399.

36. Webster, 'Textuality of the Self', p. 402.

37. *Cross Currents* 49.1 (Spring 1999), pp. 87-96.

38. Kilcourse, 'Contemplative Struggle', p. 87.

39. Kilcourse, 'Contemplative Struggle', p. 89.

40. Kilcourse, 'Contemplative Struggle', p. 93.

Still another article which appeared in *Cross Currents*, Shaul Magid's 'Monastic Liberation as Counter-Cultural Critique in the Life and Thought of Thomas Merton' deals with broad cultural questions and is of value because it demonstrates Merton's potential significance for readers beyond the established circle.⁴¹ This article suggests the advantage and difficulty of reading Merton from the point of view of a student of Jewish mysticism. Magid seeks to read Merton 'trans-religiously' and while that is valuable it sometimes seems as if Merton's Christianity is so minimized that we are almost invited to forget his particular Cistercian heritage; Magid writes: 'I see him merely as one religious seeker, unique, in his courage and tenacity, traveling on the bridge from modernity to postmodernity deeply connected yet critical of his pietistic past, and optimistic yet deeply cautious about the new era that was unfolding'.⁴² This article demonstrates Merton's value for a circle of readers beyond the expected; it refers to Thomas McKenna's earlier essay, published in *The Merton Annual* about post-modernism.⁴³ Merton can serve as a bridge builder. These pieces by Webster, Kilcourse, and Magid are all of substance. What is needed, of course, is for such articles to more definitely connect with Merton's sense of the culture at large. (A two part analysis of the complete journals by Kilcourse, which he mentioned in passing in last year's bibliographical review-essay, should again be noted. His article achieves distance from the complexity of the complete journals and suggests connections with the wider culture.)⁴⁴

Ross Labrie's 'Thomas Merton and America' appeared in *Cithara*.⁴⁵ It shows that while Merton spoke of uprooting himself from the United States, he became convinced that America was the 'most influential country in the world' and therefore he became increasingly determined to shape 'its moral character and influence.' Labrie provides good analysis of Merton's ambivalence about this relationship to America and also demonstrates how Merton distanced himself from Europe as he became more involved with his adopted culture. Labrie also provides an analysis of how Merton became increasingly aware of the threat of technological culture and that he was alarmed

41. 49.4 (1999/2000), pp. 445-62.

42. Magid, 'Monastic Liberation', p. 447.

43. Thomas McKenna, 'A Voice in the Postmodern Wilderness', *The Merton Annual* 8 (1996), pp 122-37.

44. 'Thomas Merton's Journals: A Matrix of Spirituality', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6.2 (1998), pp. 22-17; and ' "A Mirror to Recognize the True Self" Thomas Merton's Journals', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, 7.1 (1999), pp. 19-24.

45. *Cithara: Essays in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* 38.2 (1999), pp. 21-30.

about what might happen if that frightening aspect of modern culture were joined with 'an energetic and rather narrow nationalism'.⁴⁶ Each of the preceding articles just singled out demonstrates careful speculations about Merton's relationship to the wider culture.

Much of what remains to be commented upon is valuable because it too is speculative in a similar manner. These remaining comments are limited to the rather predictable sources which Merton scholars have come to rely upon: *The Merton Seasonal*, *The Merton Journal*, and *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*.

Several articles about relationships and which suggest areas for wider study appeared in *The Merton Seasonal*. Edward Rice's 'Starting a Magazine: A Guide for the Courageous—The Short, Happy Life of *Jubilee*' (24.1 [1999]), for example, provides an overview of the history of the magazine he founded and to which Merton frequently contributed. Rice states that the magazine asked for 'the Church to rethink its traditional stand' (p. 6). A scholar could follow up by going to all of the *Jubilee* contributions by Merton and analyze just how he sought to accomplish this.

Vivian Ligo's 'Bystander at the Abyss: A Contemplative Vision of Liberation' (24.2 [1999]) is an analysis of Merton's perception of spiritual malaise, especially in the 1960s. She demonstrates how Merton's struggle was one in '...microcosm of what was to be macrocosm in later years' for others (p. 5). Her insights could be used to study many specific Merton works in much greater detail.

In 'A Country Whose Center is Everywhere: Merton at the Mim Tea Estate' (Springboard Address, International Thomas Merton Society, Sixth General Meeting, 1999), Erlinda G. Paguio provides insights which could be sifted for their applicability to a much wider range of Merton's work (24.3 [1999]). Paguio's reflections analyze Merton's visit to the Mim Tea Estate in Dargeeling, India, in November 1968, shortly before he died. The dialectic between what is and what is not 'between the world-refusal of the monk [as] related to his desire for change' (p. 16) is focused upon and related to many other key moments in Merton's writings, yet most of Paguio's remarks are made quickly because of the nature of this address. Many more connections remain to be made.

Gerald Schiffhorst's 'Entering Merton's "Friendly Communication of Silence"' appears in the final 1999 issue (24.4 [1999]). This short article speculates about silence and presence as understood by Merton in relation to the context of Christian spirituality in contemporary cul-

46. Labrie, 'Merton and America', p. 27.

ture. Silence is not really about absence, rather 'genuine silence is about presence' (p. 15). Here too, should scholars wish, connections could be pursued by study of the whole Merton canon.

In *The Merton Journal* (published by The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland) a wide range of pieces always appear, and there frequently seem to be gems which suggest possible follow-up would be possible. In the Easter 1999 issue (6.1 [1999]) two pieces are especially of interest. Melvyn Matthews's 'Contemplative Pastor, Contemplative Church, Spirituality for a Dark Age' (pp. 2-18) shows the continuing usefulness of Merton's thought as applied to living in today's world. In Robert G. Waldron's 'Thomas Merton, Czeslaw Milosz and Robinson Jeffers' parallels are drawn which, again, ought to be pursued in more detail. In the Advent 1999 issue (6.2 [1999]) David Emmott's 'The Gift to be Simple: Thomas Merton and the Inner City' again demonstrates Merton's value in a practical sense.

In *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* David Broad's article 'The Whale's Belly: Thomas Merton's Priesthood' (34.4 [1999], pp. 501-508) provides an ambitious survey of references in Merton's writing about his priesthood. Broad argues that Merton's vocation as priest is 'bound up with his search for authenticity' (p. 501). This analysis of Merton's changing views of the priesthood deals persuasively with the fact that Merton did ultimately 'became comfortable being marginalized' (p. 524). Merton's struggle over the meaning of his vocation is carefully chronicled, yet this article, in my view, does not go the next logical step which would be to tie all this back in with Merton's evolving sense of his responsibilities for the culture at large. In a sense this commentary has now gone full circle. I am reminded of Cunningham's new book, the first item about Merton analyzed in this review-essay. It is successful because it constantly building connections beyond the monastic because of the monastic. I am also reminded again of the vastness of Merton's writings and of the difficulty which scholars will continue to have as they investigate all the various threads of his encounter with the presence of God by way of encounters with the wider culture.